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TAGS: [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [SOCI](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI WOMEN PLAN CAMPAIGN TO PRESS FOR RIGHT TO DRIVE

REF: RIYADH 0357

Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Post has learned from a knowledgeable source that a group of Saudi women possessing foreign drivers' licenses is organizing a coordinated campaign to press the Saudi Arabian Government, by means of bringing legal cases, on the issue of women driving in the Kingdom. End Summary.

12. (C) Saudi businesswoman and human rights campaigner Samira Bitar (Strictly Protect) told EconOff that she is organizing an unusual legal campaign to push authorities to grant Saudi women the right to drive. According to Bitar she and approximately 25 other Saudi women throughout the Kingdom have been communicating by email and have amassed a list of 600 Saudi women willing to participate in the campaign which may take place during the second half of 2009. The 600 women, all of whom have foreign drivers' licenses, will go, in some coordinated fashion, to the appropriate government offices in cities and towns where they live and apply for drivers' licenses. When the authorities, as the organizers anticipate, refuse to grant the licenses, a small cadre of lawyers recruited by the women have agreed to bring court cases demanding to know the legal basis for the decision.

13. (C) King Abdullah is reported to have stated many times in the press -- including, according to Bitar, in a 2005 television interview with Barbara Walters -- that there is nothing in Saudi law to prevent women from driving. Frustrated by the King's repeated comments that when society is ready, women will drive, this group of women plans to use the King's own words against him -- arguing that they are ready now. While their campaign avoids the incendiary activity of actually driving cars to make their point, the women hope to raise the subject to the front page of social discourse thereby accelerating the process of determining just how ready Saudi society is today to see women behind the wheel.

14. (C) Comment. The prohibition on women's driving garners much media attention and rumors of the issue's imminent demise surface periodically (reftel). However, it is important to note that obtaining the right to drive will not in and of itself improve the status of women. The real issue, which is slowly receiving wider attention both within Saudi Arabia and in the international community, is the need for full legal independence for women, which will require abolishing the oppressive male guardianship system. Being able to drive will mean little if women are not free to get

into the car in the first place without the permission of a male relative. End Comment.
QUINN